

Recent Changes to the Alberta Cabinet: 2006-2018
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Introduction

No one (or very few) could have foreseen the turmoil in Alberta politics when Ralph Klein left office in December 2006. The Progressive Conservative government embarked upon a period of sustained factional upheaval with premiers and cabinet ministers changing every few years if not every few months. But the biggest change came in May 2015 when the forty-four-year-old Progressive Conservative government lost the election to the New Democrats under Rachel Notley.

Alberta had experienced political turmoil in the past. The provincial government of William Aberhart had challenged federal authority in the 1930s and early 1940s, while Peter Lougheed opposed federal constitutional and economic policies in the 1970s and 1980s. And, Ralph Klein and his Progressive Conservative government used the spectre of some sort of federal government intrusion into provincial jurisdiction to portray itself as the defender of all things Alberta. But the political battles beginning in the mid-2000s were of a different type. They were intra-party struggles over leadership and policy. The factional divisions within the Progressive Conservative could have been expected in a government which had been in office for over forty years.

For decades politics had been predictable in Alberta. After the Progressive Conservatives had replaced Social Credit as the governing party in the August 1971 provincial election, the central political question was how big the Progressive Conservative legislative majority would be. But the forced departure of Ralph Klein in December 2006 signaled a new political dynamic. While the Progressive Conservatives continued to win majorities there was considerable disarray within their ranks. Between 2006 and 2015 the party had five leaders, six Ministers of Energy and seven Ministers of Finance. The factionalism within the governing Progressive Conservatives culminated with the May 2015 election of a New Democratic Party government led by Rachel Notley.

Nevertheless, throughout this period the internal structure of cabinet remained in place. The administrative process of the Klein era integrated backbench Members of the Legislature (MLAs) into the executive through Standing Policy Committees (SPCs), limited traditional cabinet committees to three, and centralized power in an Agenda and Priorities Committee, the Premier's Office and Executive Council Office. Cabinet members came and went – with some frequency -- but the internal structure of cabinet survived. This post-institutionalized structure was popular with both backbenchers and the party leadership. It gave government Members a voice in executive decision making while the Premier and his/her office used it to maintain the loyalty of backbenchers to the government and party.

Only when the New Democrats came to office did the administrative style of the cabinet change. The New Democrats put in place a more traditional cabinet committee system that differed from

its predecessors in several important ways. First, the new cabinet process was leaner than the institutionalized cabinets of Alberta governments in the 1970s and 1980s. The new “lean” cabinet process consisted of five cabinet committees, but was soon reduced to four. As well, there was no coordinating committee of cabinet such as an Agenda and Priorities or Priorities and Planning committee chaired by the premier. The coordination of government initiatives was now the work of the Executive Council Office and the Premier’s Office. Third, the Standing Policy Committees were discarded.

Research Question

The paper is a case study in the development of the cabinet process in Alberta between 2006-2018. This is the post-Klein era in which existing post-institutionalized cabinet structure remained in place until there was a change of government. Although Alison Redford abandoned the Klein process, it was re-instated in less than a year. It was only with the election of the New Democrats that a new and very different cabinet process was put in place. Building a sequential and continuous narrative of the development of the executive decision-making process in Alberta between 2006 - 2018, the paper attempts to explain the persistence of the post-institutionalized cabinet of the early 1990s and why efforts to replace it failed until the New Democrats came to government. The second purpose of the paper is to describe the changes to the cabinet process put in place by the New Democrats and how this new cabinet process differs from its predecessors.

In the Westminster system cabinets legislate with the advice and consent of the legislature/parliament.¹ The form that cabinets take across the array of Westminster systems varies considerably. In Canada’s provinces, premiers have dominated both legislatures and cabinets. This is partly the results of the small size of provincial legislatures compared to national legislatures; Alberta, for example, has 87 legislative seats while the Canadian parliament has 338. As well, provincial legislatures downloaded many of their responsibilities to local government such as school boards, water districts, municipalities and other local institutions.² The result of these factors was that until the latter part of the 20th century provincial governments dealt with a reasonably small number of issues which did not require a complex decision making apparatus. The result was that until the late 1960s and 1970s most provincial cabinets lacked a system of committees – except for Treasury Board, which acted as a form of inner cabinet.

The cabinet is where decisions are taken and policy is initiated. But the cabinet system requires a substructure of committees and support to function in a coherent and effective manner. The work of cabinet committees can be broken down into three categories. The first, is the coordination of government business such as spending and revenue and the government’s legislative program. The second category of cabinet committee work is the consideration of issues which may have political implications. Third, cabinet committees are where disagreements between ministers and

¹A. L. Lowell, *The Government of England* (London: as quoted in A.H. Birch, *Representative and Responsible Government* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964) 77.

²J.E. Hodgetts, *From Arms Length To Hands On. The Formative Years Of Ontario’s Public Service 1867-1940* (Toronto: Ontario Historical Studies Series, University of Toronto Press, 1995).

departments may be resolved. Cabinet committees were introduced in Alberta by Peter Lougheed between 1971 and 1974. While committees had existed under previous governments they were limited to the consideration of spending and taxation at Treasury Board. The Treasury Board is the only cabinet committee mandated by legislation. Other than Treasury Board cabinet made decisions as a group with the aid of a cabinet office/executive council office. Lougheed sought to introduce a framework for collective deliberation and decision-making on the major issues facing his government. The cabinet committees were to ensure that there was proper discussion of issues across the departments and that ministers had the time and place to present their views. The committees of cabinet were to solicit advice from the public service, present alternatives to problems and make decisions on issues facing the government.

The Lougheed cabinet structure was replaced by a very different system. After becoming premier in December 1992 Ralph Klein kept three cabinet committees – Legislative Review, Treasury Board and Agenda and Priorities. Along with these committees a system of Standing Policy Committees were established. While the SPCs covered the same policy areas as the cabinet committees they replaced, their membership was a mix of backbench MLAs and cabinet ministers from the governing Progressive Conservative Party. It was this combination of the executive and the backbenches which provided the Premier and his staff with leverage over the backbenches while permitting government members some input into cabinet decisions. After Klein left office in December 2016, the SPCs were kept by the succeeding government of Ed Stelmach. Five years later Stelmach's successor as Progressive Conservative Premier, Alison Redford, replaced the SPCs with a more traditional system of cabinet committees. But the decision making process now excluded Progressive Conservative backbenchers. The Premier and cabinet faced dissent within the caucus and the SPCs were re-established within 10 months. The succeeding Hancock and Prentice governments saw the utility of the SPCs and kept them. They realized that it had become too difficult to replace the SPCs with another model of cabinet organization. The cabinet structure of the Progressive Conservatives had been "locked-in." Although there may have been a more efficient cabinet structure, a path dependency had developed which reinforced the role of the SPCs in executive decision-making.

Under the Progressive Conservatives the SPCs were virtually impossible to replace. It took the election of May 2015 and the defeat of the Progressive Conservative government to reach a critical juncture at which the cabinet processes could be reconfigured. The New Democrats came to office with a very different policy agenda than their predecessors and they brought a very different view of government. They put in place what several of the senior officials in the new government described as a more traditional Westminster cabinet structure. The redesigned cabinet structure was to focus on three or four central issues. With fewer committees than the Lougheed cabinet and without the Standing Policy Committees of his Progressive Conservative successors, the New Democrats put in place a "lean" system of decision making.

Out of this recent period of political churn in Alberta two key hypotheses emerge. First, the established Standing Policy Committees had reached an equilibrium. The SPCs had been established within a Westminster system. The role of the backbench MLA had taken on a new importance. On the other hand, the Premier and cabinet used the SPCs to keep control of the caucus through the a system of rewards and punishments. Removing a chair of an SPC would result in the loss of income as well as influence. The SPCs illustrate a positive feedback which

both the executive and caucus used to their advantage. The success of the SPCs during the Klein years had produced consequences that increased the probability they would be retained by succeeding governments. The case of the Standing Policy Committees, therefore, illustrates a type of path dependency which generated a powerful cycle of self-reinforcing activity. It was only with the replacement of the Progressive Conservatives by the New Democrats that this feedback mechanism was broken. In the place of the SPCs or “post-institutionalized” cabinet, the Notley government established a traditional Westminster cabinet decision-making system but one which was much less encumbered by a hierarchy of committees. It was a system of “lean” decision-making.

The Alberta Cabinet Under Ralph Klein

With the selection of Ralph Klein as Progressive Conservative Party leader and Premier in December 1992 the process of the de-construction or de-institutionalization of cabinet began. Klein initiated several sweeping reforms which fundamentally altered the nature of decision-making in Alberta but which nevertheless remained within the Westminster system and the province’s premier-centred administrative style.

The first significant change came with the appointment of communications officers in each minister’s office. These communications officers were appointed by the Executive Director in the Premier’s office and they reported to the Director of Communications in the Premier’s Office. As well, every ministerial executive assistant was interviewed as to their perception of their role. If in the course of the interview it was determined that the executive assistant did not see their job as political he/she was terminated. While ministers were free to hire their own executive assistants, Klein’s Chief of Staff Rod Love ensured that they viewed their role as a political operative and not a neutral member of the bureaucracy. This caused considerable problems for several ministers and their assistants. A number of ministerial aids had been seconded from the permanent bureaucracy and the politicization of their role not only confused them but led to their dismissal.³

The most significant change to the cabinet decision-process, however, was the blending of cabinet and caucus committees into a hybrid American legislative committee system with a traditional parliamentary cabinet committee structure. Since copied by British Columbia under the government of Gordon Campbell,⁴ and in Ottawa in 2010,⁵ the goal of this new post-institutionalized cabinet structure was, in the words of Rod Love, Klein’s Chief of Staff, to simplify the decision-making process. The central unit in this new structure was the Agenda and Priorities committee. Although the modifications were perceived as a necessary reform of an increasingly unwieldy structure, there was a blurring between the Executive Council and Premier’s Office functions. Klein and Love reduced the number of cabinet committees from

³ Rod Love, Lecture, Mount Royal University, 1 March 1999.

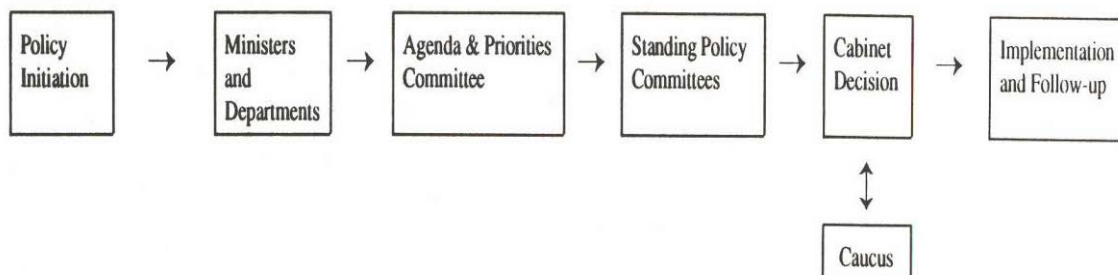
⁴ Norman J. Ruff, “The West Annex: Executive Structure and Administrative Style in British Columbia,” in *Executive Styles In Canada. Cabinet Structures and Leadership Practices in Canadian Government* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press: 2005) 225-241.

⁵ R. Paul Wilson, Minister’s Caucus Advisory Committees under the Harper Government,” *Canadian Public Administration*, vol 58, no. 2: 227-248.

fifteen to three – Agenda and Priorities, Treasury Board and Legislative Review. In place of cabinet committees Love created what he refers to as Standing Policy Committees. Comprised of both cabinet members and backbench MLAs, each standing policy committee was chaired by a private government member with the authority to hear public submissions. Ministers were appointed as vice-chairs of these committees. During cabinet deliberations of an issue which fell under the jurisdiction of a particular SPC, the committee chair – a government backbencher – sat at the cabinet table to represent their committee’s views. (See figure 1)

Figure 1: The Policy Process in Alberta

The Standing Policy Committees struck in 1992 were Agriculture and Rural Development, Community Services, Financial Planning, and Natural Resources and Sustainable Development. In October 1995, a Standing Policy Committee on Health Restructuring was added. In March 1997, following the provincial election, the Standing Policy Committees were restructured. The committees announced were: Agriculture and Rural Development, Community Services, Education and Training, Financial Planning and Human Resources, Health Planning, Jobs and Economy, and Sustainable Development and Environmental Protection. The Agenda and Priorities Committee coordinated the activities of the Standing Policy Committees. Any sub-committee struck by the Standing Policy Committees was to be task oriented and have a maximum 45 day life. Each Committee was given its own terms of reference but all were to



review and make recommendations on policies, programs, and legislation and hear public submissions in their respective areas of competence.

The committees were also to monitor existing programs, services, and legislation. In addition the Committees were to consider the budgetary implications of each proposal as well as implementation and communications strategies. The Committees were to review the budgets of departments that impinged on their jurisdiction. For example, the Standing Policy Committee on Agriculture and Rural Development had jurisdiction over Municipal Affairs; Agriculture, Food and Rural Development; Public Works, Supply and Services; and Transportation and Utilities. This oversight role was designed so that Committee members would have the opportunity to provide comments and make recommendation for consideration by Ministers in the preparation of the annual budget and the new three-year-business plans for each department inaugurated by the Klein government. Each Committee was assigned a Cabinet Policy Coordinator (assistant

deputy ministers) who reported to the Deputy Minister of Executive Council. The Cabinet Policy Coordinator was to oversee the administrative and policy requirements of each Committee.

The creation of Standing Policy Committees meant a transformation of the policy initiation process in the province. Policy initiatives were still to be sponsored by a minister and drafted by his/her department. The minister would take the proposed policy to the Agenda and Priorities Committee which would either reject it or send it to one of the seven Standing Policy Committees. The Standing Policy Committee reviewed the policy and their decision was sent to Caucus and Cabinet for final approval. If the policy initiative required legislative changes, the proposal would then go to the Legislative Review Committee. This Committee was comprised of Ministers, MLAs, and legal counsel. It undertook a final review of legislation to ensure that the legal text would have the intended consequences. Once the Legislative Review Committee approved a draft, the legislation was printed and put on Notice in the official papers of the Assembly.

Under this reformed cabinet system the Deputy Minister of Executive Council remained as Secretary to Cabinet. As with the Lougheed and Getty governments, the Secretary to Cabinet carried “out functions associated with two distinct positions.” First, as Clerk of the Executive Council, the Deputy had overall responsibility for the administration of the Executive Council Office, Cabinet and its committees as well as the Office of the Lieutenant Governor. There was a Deputy Clerk who acted as Deputy Secretary and who was responsible for the day-to-day operations of the office. Second, as Deputy Minister of the Executive Council, the position was responsible for ensuring that government policies were communicated and coordinated on behalf of the Executive Council.

Under Klein a small Cabinet Secretariat of fourteen to sixteen members organized and coordinated the planning and policy meetings that took place within the government. It was also responsible for the administration and record-keeping of Cabinet, the Standing Policy Committees, the Agenda and Priorities Committee, and the Legislative Review Committee. As well, the Secretariat participated in the coordination of the Treasury Board fiscal and business planning process with the departments, the Standing Policy Committees, and the Treasury Board. The Policy Coordination group provided administrative, policy, planning and coordination support for the Deputy Minister of Executive Council.⁶

While much of the support structure was retained from the Lougheed and Getty years, the creation of Standing Policy Committees created a very different type of cabinet policy process than that found in the other provinces or at the national level in Canada. Within the framework of Alberta political life, Klein and Love designed a system of issue initiation and management that was described as participatory. Backbench MLAs were now included in Cabinet deliberations and had an opportunity to put forward their own ideas. This system, however, did not have the effect in keeping with the stated wish to give government back to the people. Replacing eleven Committees of Cabinet with Standing Policy Committees that included a large number of backbench MLAs – each had between twelve and sixteen members composed of both

⁶Premier’s Office, *Office of the Premier and Executive Council*, (Edmonton: Office of the Premier, n.d.)

backbenchers and cabinet members usually in equal numbers – served to focus decision-making within the five member Agenda and Priorities Committee which was chaired by the Premier. The Standing Policy Committees were not as powerful as the disbanded cabinet committees of the Getty and Lougheed eras. Other than Treasury Board -- which has a limited, fiscal mandate -- there was no cabinet committee able to challenge the decision-making authority of Agenda and Priorities. This effort to streamline the policy process led to a type of post-institutionalized cabinet -- a mix of the traditional cabinet committee system found in parliamentary democracies and a type of American Congressional legislative-committee system. The rational planning of the Lougheed-Getty years had not been entirely abandoned. The centralizing of authority in one cabinet committee – Agenda and Priorities – reestablished a style of governance not seen since the Social Credit years. This combination of different styles created a process of cabinet decision making and administration in Alberta that continued the premier dominated style of Alberta governance.

Stelmach, Redford, Hancock, and Prentice

On 14 December 2006 Ralph Klein formally gave his letter of resignation to Lieutenant Norman Kwong. After receiving Klein's letter of resignation Kwong invited Ed Stelmach, a former Minister of Transportation, Intergovernmental Relations, Infrastructure, and Agriculture, Food and Rural Development to form a government. Stelmach had won the Progressive Conservative leadership race to replace Klein. Coming third on the first ballot, Stelmach won on the second ballot with 482 votes or 0.4 per cent over the next closest competitor, Jim Dinning. On 12 December two days before being asked to form a government, Stelmach announced an eighteen member cabinet – a loss of six ministers from twenty-four in the last Klein government. The usual criteria for appointment to an Alberta cabinet such as region, gender, ethnicity, and a balance of urban and rural members were set aside by an emphasis on caucus members and cabinet ministers who had supported his leadership bid. Stelmach was put into a room with three different models of how the cabinet could be organized. Beside the cabinet charts he had a list of all the Progressive Conservative members. Although Stelmach had been pushed to include some MLAs, he made the cabinet selections on his own.

In order to reduce the size of cabinet Stelmach announced that several ministries would be merged. For example, a new ministry, Service Alberta, merged the responsibilities of the former Government Services Department and Restructuring and Government Efficiency and Advanced Education and Innovation and Science were combined into Advanced Education and Technology. As well, several other ministries were combined in order to focus on the government's priorities going into an election expected within the next 18 to 24 months. These changes were to deal with the cabinet planning process. Stelmach and his senior advisors on both the political and administrative sides of the executive argued that the Klein crisis management model of the early and mid-1990s needed to be reformed. The crisis management cabinet with its focus on provincial deficit and debt reduction was not “capable of handling the finances of growth.”⁷ The central economic concern of the mid-2000s was inflation, an issue, it was argued, the Klein model was not equipped to manage. A new emphasis was placed on immigration, labour shortages, and infrastructure to aid a growing economy and population.

⁷Confidential interview with author, Calgary, 12 March 2007.

Stelmach and his advisors believed that too much time and effort had been given over to spending control. They felt that a new emphasis was required. The Deputy Minister to Executive Council, Ron Hicks and the Premier's Chief of Staff,⁸ Ron Glenn, advised the new premier to streamline the cabinet in order to pursue a different policy agenda. While several ministries were combined one key department was divided. Stelmach and his advisors believed that Finance department was too powerful. A separate ministry of the Treasury Board was created and given the task of coordinating government policies, capital planning, internal audit, and overseeing and promoting public-private partnerships.

Stelmach kept the Standing Policy Committees. He did, however, rename them. They were now called Cabinet Policy Committees (CPCs). Instead of the seven Standing Policy Committee of the Klein years, five CPCs were created. They consisted of Community Services, Government Services, managing Growth Pressures, and Resources and the Environment. The changes were made to reflect the new government's concern with managing what was expected to be sustained economic growth.⁹ The Cabinet Policy Committees were to review and make recommendations on policies, programs and legislation related to areas such as public safety, the economy, resources and the environment, community services, and health. As with the Standing Policy Committees of the Klein government, the CPCs had the ability to call witnesses, hear submissions from groups and individuals, review departmental spending and make recommendations to cabinet. Each committee covered a number of different ministries. For example, the Cabinet Policy Committee on Public Safety and Services oversaw the departments of Aboriginal Relations, Executive Council, Justice and Attorney General, Service Alberta/ Corporate Human Resources, Solicitor General and Public Security and Treasury Board. The Cabinet Policy Committee was chaired by Neil Brown a backbench member from Calgary.

At the time of the Stelmach transition in December 2006, Ron Hicks, the Deputy Minister of Executive Council, was asked to review the deputy ministers. Hicks was given the opportunity to comment on the list of cabinet members a few days before they were officially announced. He surveyed Stelmach's picks for cabinet and sought to match new ministers with experienced deputies. He saw this as a way of mitigating any mistakes on the part of inexperienced ministers. The Deputy was also asked to assess the cadre of deputy ministers. After accounting for those deputies who were retiring, Hicks suggested few changes. While the final decisions on cabinet and deputy ministers rested with the Premier and his political staff, senior officials were asked for their views on who should be appointed.

In June 2007, seven months after taking office, Stelmach added three members to cabinet as associate ministers. There was now an associate minister of capital planning, affordable housing and urban development and sport and tourism promotion. These three new members were sworn into Executive Council and participated in cabinet meetings.¹⁰ The Cabinet Policy Committees

⁸ The formal title for the Chief of Staff in the Premier's Office is Executive Director. But the title Executive Director has fallen out of use. The Executive Director is now referred to as the Chief of Staff.

⁹ Confidential interview with author, Calgary, 7 March 2007.

¹⁰ Alberta, *Managing Growth Pressures*, New Release, 22 June 2007.

remained in place with no changes to their mandates.

After the March 2008 provincial election, the Progressive Conservatives were returned with 71 out of 83 seat in the Legislative Assembly. The Premier reorganized cabinet by adding four new departments including Culture and Community Spirit, Housing and Urban Affairs, and Aboriginal Relations. The former Infrastructure and Transportation became two separate departments. The cabinet now consisted of twenty-four ministers. As well, the Cabinet Policy Committees were realigned. Their number was increased to five from the original four. They included Community Services, Economy, Health, Public Safety and Services, and Resources and the Environment. The committees aligned with the government's several initiatives of ensuring resource development in an environmentally sustainable manner, enhancing value added activity, innovation, and improving the long-term viability of the provincial economy among other priorities.¹¹

Considerable value was placed on Cabinet Policy Committees. The Premier and the political staff believed that the government ended up with better decisions through the CPC process. The CPCs, they believed, brought a cross section of the province together. As a result, the government "knew the issues that were going to bite it." The CPCs also gave the government members "something to do." "They were actually engaged." And when the member returned to his/her constituency the CPC prepared them to answer the government's critics and were better able to explain government policy.¹² With most backbenchers sitting on more than one CPC there was also the opportunity to assess potential cabinet members. With positive feedback from both the Premier and his advisors as well as the government members, the CPCs were an important part of the cabinet policy process. For a decade and a half they had helped the Progressive Conservative government shape policy and form a complex series of alliances with backbenchers as well as establish an access point to government for various interests.

Faction battles within the Progressive Conservative government appeared after a critical by-election loss in September 2009. A candidate for the Wildrose Alliance Party, Paul Hinman, took what was thought to be a safe progressive Conservative seat in Calgary. The fissure appeared almost immediately in the Stelmach government and the Progressive Conservative caucus. The cleavages appeared to represent a strident group of fiscal conservatives who called for spending cuts and a balanced budget. In the midst of the Great Recession of 2007-2009 many in the party and government believed that fiscal austerity would only exacerbate an already troubled economic situation. Nevertheless, the differences over fiscal policy split conservative ranks. Many former Progressive Conservative supporters moved to a far-right alternative that promised to restore what the Wildrose Alliance candidate described as fiscal discipline.

After the by-election loss the fissure within Progressive Conservative ranks became untenable. There was a continuous battle within cabinet over deficit spending with Premier Stelmach arguing for continued spending and the Minister of Finance F.L. (Ted) Morton demanding balanced budgets. In January 2011, Morton refused to submit a deficit budget and was about to announce his resignation when Stelmach announced he would leave the premier's office as soon

¹¹ Alberta, *Stelmach sets new Alberta agenda*. 13 December 2006.

¹² Robin Campbell, interview with author, 9 May 2018.

as the party could select his replacement. Two of the most powerful politicians in Alberta had abruptly stepped down from office precipitating a leadership contest in the governing Progressive Conservative party. Over the next few months several more cabinet ministers resigned in order to seek the party leadership. Eight months later Alison Redford, the former Minister of Justice, emerged as the party leader and the province's new premier.

After her leadership victory and swearing in as Premier, Alison Redford set about reorganizing cabinet. She reduced its size from 24 to 21 and added an Operations Committee to the decision process. Although they restructured the Cabinet Policy Committees system, Redford and her transition advisors had decided to keep them. The new Cabinet Policy Committees included Energy, Public Health and Safety, Finance, Community Development, and Education. They were chaired by government caucus members but now included from three to five cabinet members. The new government established three cabinet committees: Treasury Board, Agenda and Priorities, and Operations. The Operations Committee was to act as a coordinating body to implement the government's policy agenda. The Operations Committee was to be responsible for "issues management, legislation and house planning, and communications." The Operations Committee was assigned the role of a central agency including the role of the former Legislative Review Committee of cabinet. Membership of the cabinet committees consisted of one to three government caucus members, a practice that began in the 1990s under the Klein government. This cabinet structure was based on the Mulroney cabinet of the 1980s. Mulroney's Operations Committee acted as a central agency to ensure policies were carried out across the whole of government. Several members of the transition team as well as the new Premier had worked for the Progressive Conservative government in Ottawa and borrowed the federal model.¹³

Members of the premier's transition team presented her with several lists of potential cabinet members. Redford would read the lists, veto those she did not want included, and make other suggestions. But she was not intimately involved in the process of cabinet selection. The transition team had several criteria including urban and rural representation, region, gender and ethnicity.¹⁴ As well, the transition team recommended that the Deputy Minister of Executive Council, Brian Manning, be replaced by Tom Watson, the Deputy Minister of Energy. Watson, with the transition team reviewed all the deputy ministers in the government. They recommended that six deputies be replaced and that others be moved to different departments. The new Premier accepted the transition team's recommendations. There were, as well, nine parliamentary assistants appointed. While these individuals sat on the Cabinet Policy Committees they were not sworn into Executive Council. The parliamentary assistants served the same role of supporting the various ministers as parliamentary secretaries had in the Stelmach government. They were assigned specific tasks and stood in place of an absent minister during question period.

There were few changes to departmental structure. But Redford's transition team did recommend the reorganization of several policy areas such as the creation of a Ministry of Human Services which would bring children's and other social programs together under the umbrella of one ministry. As well a new Ministry of Environment and Water was established to emphasize the

¹³ Robert Hawkes, interview with author, Calgary, 12 June 2013, and Robin Campbell, interview with author, 9 May 2018.

¹⁴ Stephen Carter, interview with author, Calgary, 15 April 2018.

government's concern with protecting the province's and water resources.

On 8 May 2012, just two weeks after winning a contentious provincial election in which the 40-year Progressive Conservative dynasty appear threatened by the far-right Wildrose Alliance Party, the Redford government announced a new cabinet and a substantial reorganization of the policy process. The new cabinet consisted of 19 members including the Premier, down from the 21 member cabinet in October 2011. While several MLAs were elevated to cabinet and several demoted, the policy process itself underwent a substantial reordering. A new deputy premier, Thomas Lukaszuk, was named. Lukaszuk was appointed chair of the government Operations Policy Committee and made responsible for coordinating policies across the whole of government. The Departments of Treasury Board and Finance were merged under one minister, Doug Horner. No longer deputy premier, Horner was responsible for the two key economic departments. Moreover, he was given responsibility for overseeing a key Redford initiative, the Results-based Budgeting Program. Results-based Budgeting was a performance review of the more than 800 Government of Alberta programs and designed to "scrutinize all costs, challenge automatic growth in spending and invest" in priority areas.¹⁵

While several new appointments were made to the front benches, there were substantive modifications in the cabinet process. The first significant change was the appointment of seven MLAs as Associate Ministers to replace the group of parliamentary assistants. Most of the new Associate Ministers were from the backbenches, but one, Frank Oberle was a former cabinet minister. The associate ministers were sworn into executive council and given specific roles within several ministries. The most important post-election change, however, was the elimination of the Cabinet Policy Committees. No reason was given for the removal of the Cabinet Policy Committees.¹⁶ The three cabinet committees of Treasury Board, Agenda and Priorities, and Operations remained in place each with one to three backbench MLAs as members. But the backbenchers on the cabinet committees were not replacements for the CPCs.

The elimination of the Cabinet Policy Committees had several unintended consequences. First, the government backbenches no longer had a voice in the cabinet policy process. While they could continue to voice support or criticism of policies in caucus meetings they were left out of the executive decision-making process. This eliminated an important line of communication between the caucus and the cabinet, a particularly untenable situation for a premier who had little caucus support during the 2011 Progressive Conservative leadership race. A second factor in the removal of the CPCs was the issue of remuneration. A few days before the 8 May announcement, a report by retired Supreme Court of Canada Justice John Major recommended substantial changes to MLA compensation. One of the key recommendations was the consolidation of members' pay into a single amount. This entailed the end of a reward or incentive system for MLAs who attended committee caucus and legislative committees. If an MLA attended a Standing Policy Committee or Cabinet Policy Committee meeting they would be compensated. If they did not attend they would receive no remuneration. The pay was used as

¹⁵ Alberta, New Cabinet Team Focused on Growing Alberta's Future, Press Release, 8 May 2012.

¹⁶ Honourable J.C. Major, *Review of Compensation of Members of the Legislative Assembly. A Report*. Edmonton, Legislative Assembly of Alberta, 2 May 2012.

a lever to build loyalty among the caucus and ensure members attended committee meetings. The compensation reforms were welcomed by many in the media, public, opposition parties, and even the government, but they diminished the cabinet's control over what appeared to be a party and government increasingly divided by faction.¹⁷

In February 2013 Redford made several small changes to the cabinet membership. The Deputy Premier, Thomas Lukaszuk, was given the added role of Minister of Enterprise and Advanced Education. In July 2013, at the annual meeting of the Council of Federation at Niagara-on-the-Lake, Redford announced a new cabinet position, Minister of Family and Community Safety. This new position was in response to the increasing problem of cyber-bullying and other related issues. The Premier, however, had informed neither cabinet nor the incoming minister. In December 2013 a major cabinet shuffle was announced. The Deputy Premier and Minister of Innovation and Advanced Education, Thomas Lukaszak was replaced by David Hancock and 10 ministers were given new positions and one new position was added to the full cabinet for a total of 20 ministers including the Premier. While the Cabinet Policy Committees were not re-established, the number of associate ministers was increased from nine to 11. Combined associate ministers and ministers made up more than half of the Progressive Conservative caucus.

After a series of controversies and much factional infighting Alison Redford resigned as Premier and Progressive Conservative Party leader. David Hancock was selected by caucus as interim leader until the party could complete a leadership contest. While two ministers resigned to run in the upcoming leadership race, Hancock kept the existing cabinet intact. The leadership race saw a former Conservative federal cabinet minister from Calgary, Jim Prentice, become leader and Premier in early September 2014. After securing the party leadership Prentice dramatically altered cabinet membership.

Prentice began the process of choosing a cabinet by consulting his transition team. The new cabinet had 16 members and three associate members in addition to the premier. This was down from the 20 ministers including the Premier and 10 associate ministers in the outgoing cabinet. Three cabinet committees remained – Operations, Agenda and Priorities and Treasury Board. Prentice took time to interview MLAs for each cabinet position; Prentice took into account criteria such as competence, gender, region, and urban and rural members when selecting his cabinet. But he was determined to present a fresh face to the public. As well, Prentice kept the Standing Policy Committees that Redford had re-introduced in August 2012. As part of his plan to renew the government and Progressive Conservative party he brought in two individuals from outside the legislature – Stephen Mandel, a former Edmonton mayor and Gordon Dirks, a former chair of the Calgary Board of Education.

On the advice of several members of his transition team, Prentice make the decision to keep the Standing Policy Committees. Robin Campbell a minister in the Redford government and a member of the transition team who was familiar with the Progressive Conservative caucus as party whip was asked by Prentice to put together membership lists for the SPCs. The five SPCs had the usual range of subject areas from health to agriculture and rural issues and environment

¹⁷Robin Campbell, interview with author, 9 May 2018.

and sustainable resource development. Their membership was relative to the size of the policy area. For example, the Health SPC oversaw an area which consumed over forty per cent of the provincial budget. Agriculture and Rural development, on the other hand, had a considerably smaller budget and thus fewer committee members. Campbell and Prentice placed MLAs on the Standing Policy Committees who had demonstrated an interest in the subject area.¹⁸ Although Prentice's government experience was at the national level he made concessions to the provincial policy process. Unlike Alison Redford, he understood the importance of the Standing Policy Committees to the party backbenches and wanted to build loyalty to the new government. But an important lever over the backbench members was missing. The 2012 reforms to MLA remuneration had eliminated the extra pay for attending Standing Policy Committee meetings for all but the committee chair.

After four by-election victories in October 2014 and the absorption of much of the Wildrose Alliance Party legislative caucus in December of the same year, the Prentice government appeared to have consolidated its political position within Alberta. On 26 March the government introduced a budget which raised taxes on income, put in place a progressive income tax and raised rates on high income earners and raised taxes on a variety of items such as tobacco and alcoholic beverages. The budget warned of a gap between revenues and spending which the Finance Minister, Robin Campbell, stated needed to be addressed. On 8 April 2015, one year before the province's legislated election date, the Prentice government went to the voters.

A Return to Westminster

On 5 May 2015, the forty-four-year-old Progressive Conservative government was defeated in the Alberta provincial election. The New Democrats led by Rachel Notley emerged from the election with 54 of the province's 87 seats. As party leader and premier-designate Notley's immediate task was to select a cabinet and put an executive policy process into place. She and her senior advisors did not look to the previous government. They believed the Progressive Conservative cabinet process had disintegrated. They looked to other models for cabinet decision making. Most of the NDP transition group around Notley had experience with other governments. Brian Topp, for example, had been deputy chief of staff to Saskatchewan premier Roy Romanow. Another senior advisor who was to replace Brian Topp as Premier Notley's chief of staff in fall 2016, John Heaney, had worked for the New Democratic government in British Columbia in the 1990s and had been NDP leader John Horgan's chief of staff until the May 2015 Alberta election. Others in the transition group had similar backgrounds.

Richard Dicerni, the Deputy Minister to Executive Council had contacted Notley the evening of 5 May after the election results were known. Dicerni had experience with Liberal, Conservative and New Democratic governments in Ottawa and Toronto. As soon as the election was called he began organizing for a transition of government. He had each department prepare a series of binders describing the department's organization and the issues facing it. When it became apparent that the New Democrats might form government he called his deputies and had them read the party website and adjust the various briefing notes and binders to fit with NDP policies. Within a few days Topp and Dicerni presented the premier-designate with a model for the

¹⁸ Robin Campbell, interview with author, 9 May 2018.

cabinet decision-making process. They took the design from Ontario, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan. The Dalton McGuinty and Kathleen Wynne cabinets were of particular interest. The Ontario Liberal governments of the 2000s and 2010s were a “lean” model of decision making. With four or five cabinet committees they could focus on a few specific issues of concern to the incoming government.

The lean model introduced by the Notley government consisted of twelve cabinet ministers including the premier. There were several reasons for the small number of cabinet ministers. First, only four of the 54 person caucus had been members of the Legislative Assembly. While several new NDP MLAs had municipal experience the vast majority were new to government. The Premier made it clear she wanted to get to know caucus members before promoting anyone to cabinet. Second, the new government faced several issues which required immediate attention. The first was a June sitting of the legislature to pass a supply bill in order to fund the government. The small number of ministers allowed cabinet to debate policy as a whole and align it with government priorities. The big complex cabinets of David Peterson and Bob Rae in Ontario and Allan Blakeney in Saskatchewan were gone. The lean approach was a “deliberative model, streamlined. We would take apart committees no longer needed.”¹⁹ It was also an effort to avoid the “churn” of the previous Progressive Conservative government and bring Westminster cabinet government to Alberta.²⁰ The cabinet committees were mirrored in caucus committees. Each MLA was assigned to a caucus committee. These committees were established for several reasons. First, they were designed to give inexperienced backbenchers some background on various government policies. Second, they were an opportunity for the Premier and senior cabinet members to interact and assess the abilities of the largely unknown backbenchers.

Cabinet ministers were vetted by Brian Topp and John Heaney, but it was Notley who made the choices. The criteria used in cabinet selection were competence, region, gender, ethnicity and urban-rural location. There was an effort to achieve gender balance within cabinet. With only twelve members of cabinet, most ministers had two or more portfolios. For example, Shannon Phillips was named Minister of Environment and Parks and the Minister Responsible for the Climate Change Office. As well, she also served as the Minister for the Status of Women. There were five committees established – Treasury Board, Economic Development, Legislative Review, Social Policy, and Environment and Climate Change. There was no Agenda and Priorities Committee (or Priorities and Planning). With only eleven ministers and the premier discussion could take place around the cabinet table. This was an effort to avoid creating an inner cabinet and to establish “an expanded culture of deliberation.”²¹ The Premier was not a member of any cabinet committee, although she an ex-officio member of all the committees and attended most of their meetings.

In October 2015 Notley created a new ministry focused on economic growth and diversification in Alberta, with MLA Deron Bilous at the helm. Bilous was previously the minister of Municipal Affairs and minister of Service Alberta. Bilous was appointed minister of Economic

¹⁹ Brian Topp, interview with author, 8 May 2018.

²⁰ Brian Topp, interview with author, 15 October 2017.

²¹ Brian Topp, interview with author, 8 May 2018.

Development and Trade. He was also to chair a cabinet committee tasked with guiding the Municipal Government Act (MGA) review process. She also added Danielle Larivee as minister of Municipal Affairs and minister of Service Alberta. Lori Sigurdson was appointed minister of Advanced Education and continued to serve as minister of Jobs, Skill, Training and Labour.²² A major cabinet change occurred in October 2016. The small twelve and then thirteen member cabinet had exhausted several ministers. Five new ministers and one new associate minister were named. This allowed for a lighter workload, with most ministers now responsible for a single portfolio. Nevertheless, Alberta's Cabinet was still smaller than any previous Cabinet in the province over the past decade with 19 ministers and an associate minister. Several other cabinet members were added in January 2017 and again in October 2017 along with another associate minister.

In an effort to keep the cabinet policy process lean, several cabinet committees were disbanded when their tasks were completed. The cabinet committee on Climate Leadership, for example, was broken up in late 2015 when the province's Climate Leadership Plan was released. The cabinet committee reviewing the Municipal Government Act was disbanded when the amended Act was came into force on October 26, 2017.

The New Democrats simplified the cabinet policy process in the Government of Alberta. The idea of a lean cabinet based on models found in other provinces – especially Ontario, Manitoba and Saskatchewan – allowed a new government to focus on two or three issues while reducing the complexities of the policy process. In this system the minister would present a policy or legislation to the Premier. The Premier's Office would check to see if the legislation was consistent with the government's priorities. If the Premier's Office determined the legislation fit the government agenda, the proposal would find its way into the Throne Speech. At this point the legislation would be given to the appropriate cabinet committee for discussion. If the cabinet committee agreed the legislation was sent to caucus. After caucus debate, the proposal would return to cabinet. There were three reviews: first to cabinet then to caucus and back to cabinet. This process established a clear avenue for policy development and discussion. Yet it gave ministers and caucus opportunity to present their concerns and support. The idea of an inner cabinet with a powerful decision making committee such as Agenda and Priorities was gone. The Notley government had built a lean, collaborative process which allowed it to achieve its policy goals.

Conclusions

Between 2006-2018 there were two distinct styles of cabinet organization in Alberta. The first from 2006 to 2015 was a continuation of the post-institutionalized cabinet of the Klein era. With its Standing Policy Committees and successor Cabinet Policy Committees, government backbenchers were brought into the executive decision making process. This allowed backbenchers a voice in the policy initiation process. As well, it allowed the Premier to manage a large caucus and provided feedback from the various Progressive Conservative MLAs on government policy. But with only three cabinet committees, the Agenda and Priorities committee became an inner cabinet which enabled the Premier to dominate the machinery of the executive

²² Otiena Ellwand, Alberta Premier Rachel Notley adds new minister, new department in cabinet change," *Edmonton Journal*, 22 October 2015, A1.

decision making process. This centralization of authority was somewhat offset by the SPCs and CPCs. Backbenchers were given an opportunity to bring their concerns to the centre of the decision making process. The positive feedback from both backbenchers and cabinet made it difficult to change the process. When Alison Redford dismantled the Cabinet Policy Committees after the April 2012 provincial election, backbenchers were alienated from a Premier who did not appear to value their input into policy.

When the Cabinet or Standing Policy Committees were reinstated in August 2013 their role as a central institution of the decision making process had diminished. At almost the same time as Redford removed the Cabinet Policy Committees, the system of MLA remuneration was changed. MLAs no longer received payment for committee work. They were now expected to attend committees which were now part of their overall remuneration package. The links between the cabinet and caucus were loosened. The Premier and senior officials had lost a mechanism through which they had managed a large caucus. This exacerbated the factional battles within a party which had been in office for over forty years.

A critical juncture in the cabinet process came with the election of the New Democrats to government in May 2015. Led by Rachel Notley, the NDP had no interest in the legislative style executive decision making of the Progressive Conservatives. The New Democrats decided what one senior advisors described as a return to cabinet government. They began their tenure with twelve cabinet members and five cabinet committees – which were reduced to four within ten months – and a complementary group of caucus committees. There was no Agenda and Priorities committee dominated by the premier, acting as an inner cabinet. This lean government was designed to focus attention on a few issues and provide open communication between the Premier, cabinet and backbenches. Notley would attend as many committee meetings as time allowed, but did not chair any one. This gave committee members input in a way that was missing from the Premier dominated Progressive Conservative structure.

The changes made by the New Democrats were significant. They borrowed heavily from other jurisdictions in Canada in an effort to create a more collegial decision-making process. But there are limits to this model of decentralized authority. The Premier was “still the boss.” While there was an effort to lessen the dominance of the Premier and her senior officials and make the cabinet and its committees the focus of decision-making, this could not diminish the authority of the Premier in the provincial executive.